

U.S. Writer Spends 3 Months in Cuban Jail

By Terri Shaw

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Last Christmas Day, Cuban authorities arrested Frank McDonald, a 30-year-old American writer who had spent the previous seven months as a guest lecturer at the University of Havana, and charged him with spying. McDonald was told that he faced a possible 30-year prison sentence.

A Caribbean specialist, McDonald had spent two months in Cuba the previous year and written articles about the country under a fellowship. During that earlier stay, he had interviewed many Cubans with the aim of writing a book contrasting Cuba with the rest of the Caribbean and assessing U.S. influence in the region.

McDonald said he believes that he was detained because the Cuban Department of State Security became suspicious of his information-gathering activities, and that he was eventually released—after three months in solitary confinement—because investigations turned up no evidence that he was a spy.

During his months in prison, he said, "I had to believe the truth would free me. I really believed the revolution would make a fair judgment. I think I was dealt with in a just way."

The charge of spying was dropped before his release, McDonald said, but he was deported and his notes were confiscated because, he was told, he had violated a ban on "socio-political studies."

A State Department official familiar with the cases of Americans who have gotten into trouble in Cuba said he knew of no other case like McDonald's—that is, of a person who entered with a Cuban visa and who later was arrested.

The official said that nine U.S. citizens convicted of political crimes, such as at-

tempted invasions of the island, are presently in jail in Cuba. There are also six North Americans convicted of narcotics offenses and an unknown number of hijack-

He added that efforts had been made, through the Swiss embassy, which handles U.S. affairs in Cuba, to locate McDonald while he was in prison. The efforts were fruitless until the day after McDonald was released, when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs told the embassy that he had been held for questioning.

McDonald said his captors used "no physical intimidation."

"The only time anyone touched me," he added, "was the day my interrogator told me I would be freed. He led me out the door of the interrogation room and patted me on the back."

"I suspected that there was a regulation against touching the prisoners, and before I left I asked my interrogator about that, and he confirmed it," McDonald said.

The worst aspect of his imprisonment, McDonald said, was the fear that he would not be released.

"My interrogator told me that they knew I was a spy and could prove it," McDonald said. "He said if I confessed, the revolution would make it easy for me. I would go to a penal farm, maybe for 15 years, instead of 30 years in prison."

'Typical Police' Move

"I knew it was typical police procedure," McDonald added. "He was frightening the hell out of me to get me to tell the truth."

McDonald said the interrogator, a 26-year-old lieutenant, became very important to him — "he was responsible for my life." The Spanish-language interrogation sessions, which last-

ed 40 to 60 minutes every other day, were all McDonald had to look forward to—"the highlight of the week."

Aside from the session of "close, hard questioning," life in prison was monotonous, McDonald said.

His day began at 5 a.m. when a light above the door went on. Soon, guards brought brooms, mops and disinfectant, and McDonald cleaned the floor of his 8-by-10-foot cell.

There was a spigot with drinking water in the cell, a hole in the floor in a corner for use as a toilet and, in the ceiling above it, a waterspout for showers. He slept on a "typical prison bunk" attached to the wall with chains.

Prison Meals

At 7 a.m. breakfast—two rolls—was brought to the prisoners.

The two other meals of the day, served at 11 a.m. and 5 p.m., were served in trays with three sections. One section always contained rice prepared in different ways—"fried, boiled, mixed with beans, cooked with batter." Another section contained soup. The third contained either an egg or fish dish or something sweet, like rice pudding or fruit preserve.

"On the very best days we'd get a whole fried fish," McDonald said.

"It was pretty much what the average Cuban ate, although not quite as good," he added.

McDonald spent the days walking up and down his cell. He calculated that he walked 10 miles a day from 5 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., when he went to bed.

"My program was 12 hours up, 12 hours down," he said.

While lying in bed, the prisoner watched the changing patterns of sun and shadow on a cement overhang that blocked the view from the one window in his cell.

"The bumps on the cement made the shadows look like a mountain range, so I imagined that it was the Sierra Nevada in California," he said.

No Reading or Talking

He had no reading matter, and was not allowed to communicate with anyone on the outside. He kept track of the passage of days by making marks on the stucco wall with a spoon.

During the first three weeks of his detention, McDonald said, he was "closely questioned about my activities in Cuba and past associations." For the next 22 days he did not see his interrogator.

"I think that 22-day period was critical," he said. "I think they were trying to determine whether I was telling the truth. I was afraid that somehow they might make a mistake and decide I was guilty. But I knew they didn't have any proof. They had all my notes. I had hidden nothing."

On the 50th day of his imprisonment, McDonald was taken to is interrogator.

"First he asked, as always, how I was. Then he asked, 'Do you miss anything?'"

"I answered, 'the street,' meaning freedom."

Asked for Yogurt

"He asked if there was anything else. For some reason I thought of yogurt."

"With or without sugar?" he asked.

"I answered, 'With sugar.' From that day on twice a day I got a big jug of yogurt with that good, brown cane sugar."

"From then on I felt they didn't think I was a spy. I was moved to a better cell with two beds pushed together and a chair. A guard gave me a book. The whole tone of the questioning changed. He didn't call me

a liar any more."

McDonald was asked to write out, in English, his answers to the interrogator's questions and an autobiography.

Then, on the 85th day, he was summoned again to the interrogation room.

"My lieutenant had on a blue suit instead of his military uniform. He smiled and said, 'How are you?' Then he gave a little speech. I think I know it by heart:

"I am here officially on behalf of the revolution to tell you that because of its high sense of justice the revolution has determined it is going to grant you freedom. The charges have been dropped and you will be able to leave Cuba."

"Then he asked me how I felt. I said, 'very happy.'

'No Beatings'

"He smiled and said, 'You see, there were no beatings,' a reference to one of their earlier exchanges.

During an early interrogation, the lieutenant had rested his head on his fist and said: "We have a solution for your situation."

McDonald, looking at the fist, has asked: "Beatings?"

The interrogator had laughed and answered that, "The revolution does not do that," and he often joked with McDonald about the incident.

McDonald said that his imprisonment had not changed his generally sympathetic attitude toward the Cuban revolution.

He said he could understand the Cuban government's suspicions of him "because of the history of CIA involvement in Cuba, the constant intrusion of CIA agents, Cuban exiles from Miami.

"Cubans are highly sensitive to the presence of any activity that might be organized by the CIA, and, after all, the job of the Department of State Security is to protect the revolution."

McDonald said he had not interviewed any opponents of the regime, although he had "talked to people who were neutral, who were not revolutionaries."

Poets Under Clouds

He said he did interview

some "poets who were persecuted" and conducted the interviews openly.

McDonald said that because of "economic and other problems," the Cuban regime appeared to be narrowing the limits of intellectual freedom.

However, he said, this observation should be balanced by reporting that the government was attempting to democratize the decision-making process and selection of leaders for workers.

"The limits are narrowing for intellectuals but broadening for workers and others," he said.

McDonald plans to write a book on his experiences in Cuba, and then finish the book he was working on before his arrest.

"I think the book I would have written before this experience would be the same book I write today," he said.

"My view of the successes and problems of the Cuban revolution is the same. I still think the revolution is essentially a plus for the people of Cuba."

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